

Chapter 2

Operation JUST CAUSE: Panama

“Carlos, I’ve talked to the chief and I’ve talked to the chairman, and you are my man for everything that has to be done there. I’m putting you in charge of all forces and you’ve got it: planning, execution, the whole business. I have looked at my staff and I have told the chairman and the chief that it cannot run a contingency operation. He said you can have it and I’m holding you responsible” (1:55).

General Maxwell Thurman spoke these words to then Lieutenant General Carl Stiner. As a result, a major problem faced during Operation URGENT FURY was avoided. One of the lessons learned from the military action in Grenada was that a complex, multi-layered command and control organization, and extremely poor communications between the different forces involved created many logistics problems (2:105). General Thurman believed that, by putting General Stiner in charge of the entire operation, problems that had plagued Operation URGENT FURY, such as low priority aircraft landing ahead of high priority aircraft, would be avoided.

Background

Operation JUST CAUSE was a military action taken by the United States with several objectives: remove General Manuel Noriega from power, protect American lives, restore democracy to Panama, and secure US treaty rights to the Panama Canal. US forces faced many logistics challenges meeting these objectives. Troops and equipment had to be flown to the theater of operations and set up in secure areas to wait for the operation to begin. Food and medical supplies needed to be sent to maintain the troops. Security guards and locations to keep prisoners of war would have to be in place when needed. Fuel and ammunition to keep the troops working effectively were required.

General Noriega was the head of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) and effectively the dictating ruler of Panama. He had been indicted by two Florida grand juries for involvement with drug cartels (1:21). Noriega was also believed to be the instigator of harassment against Americans and American servicemen stationed in Panama. While tensions were high on both sides, the actions of PDF guards provoked a reaction from the White House approving the use of military forces to remove Noriega from power. US servicemen were being stopped and arrested for no obvious or legitimate reason. Some were detained at PDF facilities and harassed. Others had assault rifles aimed at them. Still others were beaten. Tensions continued to escalate culminating in an incident on December 16, 1989, when Marine Lieutenant Robert Paz was shot and killed by PDF guards at a roadblock. On December 17, President Bush ordered the execution of Operation JUST CAUSE. H hour was set for 0100, December 20, 1989 (2:210).

Airlift

The plan for Operation JUST CAUSE was to use overwhelming force to attack multiple locations at the same time. US forces hoped that the strategy would intimidate the PDF and force them to give up with little resistance. To accomplish this task, the planners spent considerable time figuring out how to secretly move large amounts of troops and equipment in a short time. The Military Airlift Command (MAC) did just that. Headquarters MAC determined it would need 60 hours to prepare the crew force needed for the invasion, including 36 hours to locate the crews and get them assembled and 24 hours for mission planning, preparation, and flight time (3:195). In the first hours of the operation, MAC airlifted 3,500 Army Rangers and paratroopers along with their cargo to three separate combat zones. This required the use of 63 C-141s and 21 C-130s (4:42).

Also helping out in the airlift were the Air National Guard (ANG) and the Air Force Reserve (AFR). MAC deployed 111 aircraft from 24 units while the ANG and AFR provided reserve support from 18 units. The ANG provided both strategic and tactical airlift support on C-5s, C-141s, and C-130s. The total number of personnel airlifted on the night of the invasion consisted of 10,000 combat troops. Six thousand troops landed for deployment while 4,000 parachuted to prescribed sites. These troops were in addition to the 13,000 troops assigned to duty in Panama at several US installations. The aircraft took off from several bases in the US and flew at low altitudes to avoid exposure to Cuban radar. Panama was considered a secure area for air operations with threats limited to ground fire. Only 14 aircraft reported damage, the majority from small arms fire. No aircraft were lost during the airlift mission. The final success of the operation can be attributed to the effectiveness of the airlift in deploying troops and equipment in such rapid fashion (2:115-117).



Loading a Jeep on a Military Airlift Command (MAC) aircraft for transport to Panama. (Official US Air Force photo)

MAC employed 84 aircraft in the initial operation for airdrop operations. These planes had to fly in from the US, converge on one of two drop zones about 100 kilometers apart, and drop their loads while avoiding detection by Cuba or the PDF. All of this was happening around 1 a.m. Panama time. This operation was the largest night combat drop since World War II D day (5:30). To make all of this happen, refueling plans were necessary. Since C-130s could not be refueled in flight, they had to land at one of the US secured airfields to refuel. Additionally, Strategic Air Command (SAC) provided KC-135 and KC-10 tankers to refuel C-141s and C-5s moving troops and equipment into the theater. These tankers came from 26 squadrons from 14 bases located in the US (2:75-77).

Weather

Weather posed some problems at several locations providing the airlift support. Fog at Travis AFB, California, caused the 7th Light Infantry Division to board at Monterey Airport instead of Travis (5:31). On the other US coast an ice storm at Pope AFB, North Carolina, caused a delay in the departure of paratroopers from Ft. Bragg. The key to aircraft leaving Pope at all was the preparedness of the Army Materiel Command's logistics assistance office (LAO). The LAO provided 321 barrels of deicing fluid needed to prepare the aircraft for flight (6:6). However, the delay in meeting the logistics challenges may have been responsible for the eventual interception of these C-141s by Cuban MIGs. Since these planes arrived well after the assigned starting time, the Cubans may have been alerted and were watching inbound routes more closely for air traffic. Several MIGs were launched from Cuba, but fortunately did not impact the completion of the C-141's mission (2:91).

Air Superiority

Aside from the encounter with the Cuban MIGs, the US had uncontested air superiority. The main reason for this was that the PDF did not have any fighter aircraft and no military aircraft permanently stationed at Rio Hato, the Panamanian Defense Forces installation on the southern coast (7:32). This allowed MAC to drop troops exactly where US commanders wanted them. It also permitted Air Force and Army aviation to provide close air support as needed. Ground forces operated without fear of enemy air attacks and resupply by air was uninterrupted (2:67).

Special Operations

Special operations aircraft had a significant role in Operation JUST CAUSE. On the first night, 65 helicopters and 20 fixed-wing special operations aircraft provided support. This amounted to the largest single employment of special operations aircraft in US history. The helicopters were used to transport troops to their assigned positions and to suppress enemy ground fire. The AC-130 gunships were used to attack the PDF installation at Rio Hato as well as give ground support by suppressing enemy ground fire (2:118-120).

Depot Support

To process the required personnel and equipment for deployment, logisticians were assigned to arrival-departure

airfield control groups (ADACGs). They developed the plans used to load the equipment to be air dropped or delivered to Panama. Equipment had to be palletized, weighed, measured, and inspected to meet safety requirements and load restrictions of the aircraft. Support personnel at the depots worked 24-hour shifts to fill requisitions. The Defense Personnel Support Center (DPSC), in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, processed 95% of the supply requirements of the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). This included more than \$13.3 million worth of food, clothing, and medical supplies. The Defense Fuel Supply Center (DFSC), in Cameron Station, Virginia, arranged for one million extra gallons of JP-4 aircraft fuel to go to Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. They also delivered 185,000 barrels of JP-5 fuel to Defense Fuel Supply Point Rodman. Defense Construction Supply Center (DCSC), Columbus, Ohio, supplied spare parts for Black Hawk helicopters, five-ton trucks, and high mobility, multipurpose, wheeled vehicles. At Defense Depot Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, more than 1,328,500 pounds of materiel was put together for airlift to Panama. Many other depots and centers supplied tons of materiel in support of the operation (8:2-4).

A major debate of any logistician during a conflict is whether to push parts and other supplies or wait until they are requested. The logistics assistance offices (LAOs) for the Army Materiel Command worked out a compromise. Packages of parts and ammunition were offered to the task force to help streamline the process. The LAO also helped find available seats for defense contractor civilians deployed to Panama. With the limited passenger seats on the aircraft, civilians were strictly controlled.

Problems

The logistics system did not operate without problems. There was no in-transit visibility of ultimate destination of shipments. This caused confusion at the ports of debarkation and embarkation. Pallets did not have adequate marking and data sheets associated with them to quickly determine the contents and destinations (6:7-8). These problems occurred from a lack of complete directives given to the personnel who assembled the pallets. The difficulty in efficiently moving supplies illustrated the need for in-transit visibility and complete identification of palletized resources.

Theater Support

The 193d Support Battalion provided in-theater support. This involved providing for the logistics needs of more than 25,000 troops deployed to Panama. The 193d established a distribution center at Luzon Field, Fort Clayton, Panama. After the first six days of the conflict, the battalion distributed 321 short tons of various classes (I-IX) of materiel, including 25 short tons of water. Eighty five percent of the tonnage went by CH-47 helicopters. They also operated two refueling points that pumped out approximately 110,000 gallons of fuel during the initial eight days. Alpha Company established an ammunition transfer point along with a graves registration point. The Battalion's 1097th Transportation Company supported missions by transporting 2,442 passengers, 848 prisoners, and 738 short tons of cargo. Much of this support was provided under enemy fire (9:8).

In support of the overall operation, the Military Airlift Command flew 775 missions to transport 39,994 passengers and 20,675 tons of cargo. This amounted to approximately one-half ton of cargo for each person deployed during the operation. The special operations units added an additional 796 missions neutralizing PDF resistance. Eight C-5s and fourteen C-141s provided humanitarian airlift efforts intended to provide for families of American troops stationed in Panama as well as Panamanian people displaced by the operation. They transported 3 tons of medical supplies, 10,000 blankets and sheets, several tons of baby food and food staples, and 2 million field rations. After the first day's operations, MAC aircraft were used to deploy 2,500 troops for security. Return trips to the US were used to evacuate wounded service personnel along with materiel no longer needed in the theater. The wounded were brought to Kelly Air Force Base, Texas. Two hundred and fifty seven patients were flown aboard one C-130 and eight C-141s (3:197-8).

Medical

The mission of medical logistics was to provide materiel to care for casualties and ease suffering. The medical logisticians had to determine the size, location, and duration of casualty flow to determine the scope of support needed. Fortunately there were adequate medical inventories already positioned in US medical treatment facilities located on the US military bases in Panama. The medical supplies were airlifted to Howard Air Force Base, Panama, to be distributed from there. The medical logistics experts in Panama were not given information about the conflict prior to its occurrence and therefore implemented the medical logistics plan given to them after H hour. The plan called for the Joint Casualty Collection Point (JCCP) personnel to bring adequate supplies and equipment stocks with them as they deployed. Resupply then came from the continental United States (CONUS) pipelines. This method caused a shortage of routine items such as litters, blood expansion fluids, sterile gauze, and other items.



A wounded US serviceman is loaded for transport to a medical facility. (Official US Air Force photo)

Restocking supplies came from the Emergency Supply Operations Center (ESOC) at the DPSC in Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania. Requests were made by AUTOVON and FAX to Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland AFB, Texas. Medical logistics personnel pulled, packed, palletized, and loaded the requested materiel for delivery within 24 hours of the request. Medical Logistics (MEDLOG) system, an automated supply and equipment inventory transactions system, was available on the computer systems, but only after a secure, uninterrupted power supply was established (10:2-5).

Additional medical logistics were handled using the Theater Army Medical Management Information System for Medical Supply (TAMMIS-MEDSUP). This is a computer software program that automates combat patient records, tracks blood inventories, and manages other medical logistics data. (8:5)

F-117

The Panama attack was the first combat mission for the F-117A fighter. This aircraft was designed to penetrate radar and air defenses and perform single-aircraft attacks on high priority targets deep behind enemy lines (7:32).

The F-117s were to drop two 2000-pound bombs near a PDF barracks at Rio Hato to stun the PDF into giving up without a fight. The F-117 was used because of the needed accuracy of the bomb drops. The aim was not to hit the PDF, but to scare them enough to give up. Six F-117s were flown to Panama to drop the bombs or to support other missions if needed and then returned to the US without landing. Refueling in flight was required for these aircraft (7:32-33; 11:30).



The F-117 was first used in combat during Operation JUST CAUSE. (Official US Air Force photo)

Enemy Assets

Another logistics issue that arose during the operation was handling enemy assets. One large category of confiscated items was weapons and ammunition. Combat service support soldiers had to inspect, classify, and transport more than 700 tons of ordnance including more than 50,000 weapons captured from the Panamanians. They also had to manage other confiscated equipment. They sorted, classified, cataloged, and packaged 31

aircraft, 29 armored vehicles, 7 patrol boats, and 20 antiaircraft guns. Decisions about disposition of the items were made based on potential use. If the item could be used by US troops in-theater, it was forwarded to a unit that could best make use of it. Otherwise, all materiel was packed and removed from the theater (8: 5).

Lessons Learned

The overall success of Operation JUST CAUSE can be attributed to many things. The efficient nighttime airlift along with detailed planning and effective air traffic control were critical. Effective training missions by all of the forces prior to

the conflict, especially those already in Panama enabled logistics requirements to be defined prior to the operation. Having 13,000 troops already stationed there and familiar with the surroundings was a tremendous benefit. Some of these troops were airlifted by MAC 11-18 May 1989, prior to the start of the operation. A total of 5,915 soldiers and marines and 2,950 tons of cargo were sent to Panama during this time period. To accomplish this feat, 34 C-5s, 39 C-141s, and 2 commercial L-1011 missions were flown (3:195). The fact that the PDF did not have an air force to speak of is yet another reason for the success of the missions. All of these facts need to be remembered in considering the overall success and lessons learned from Operation JUST CAUSE.

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